



**Masonboro Island Reserve
Local Advisory Committee Meeting
Tuesday, October 13, 2015, 4 pm
Habitat Conference Room, UNCW CMS**

Attendance

<u>LAC Partner Organization Members</u>	<u>Present</u>
NC Audubon, Walker Golder	No
Friends of the Reserve (FOR)	No
New Hanover County Sheriff's Office, Sergeant Steve Schmidlin	Yes
New Hanover County Planning Department, Chris O'Keefe	Yes
NC Coastal Land Trust, Jessica Blake	No
Division of Marine Fisheries	No
Division of Parks and Recreation – CB, Chris Helms	No
Town of Wrightsville Beach	No
<u>Community Members and Community Organizations Members</u>	
Neal Andrew	Yes
Richard Cecelski	No
Masonboro.org	No
Haywood Newkirk	No
William Raney	Yes
Pat Rittenmeyer	No
Sam Romano	Yes
Dr. Anthony Snider	No
Surfrider, Cape Fear – Sean Ahlum	Yes
Ted Wilgis	Yes (by phone)
Martin Willard	Yes
Dr. Amanda Williard	Yes
<u>Others Present</u>	
Hope Sutton, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Stewardship Coordinator & Southern Sites Manager	
Marie Davis, DCM/NCCR & NCNERR Education Specialist	

Reserve-wide Administrative Update

- *Legislative Update*

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources officially became the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) on Sept. 18, 2015 when Governor McCrory signed the 2015 Appropriations Act into law (Session Law 2015-241).

The N.C. Coastal Reserve and National Estuarine Research Reserve is impacted by two additional sections in the Act. One section involves studying the removal of a portion of the New Inlet Dam at the Zeke's Island Reserve and the other will look at moving the Reserve program from DEQ to the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. Details for the aforementioned sections are provided below.

Cape Fear Estuarine Resource Restoration

The Cape Fear Estuarine Resource Restoration section [14.6.(h)] considers the removal of a portion of the New Inlet Dam, or "the rocks," at the Zeke's Island Reserve, which is part of the North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve (NCNERR). The General Assembly finds that the dam was constructed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) in the late 19th century. It further finds that the southern component of the dam impedes the natural flow of water between the Cape Fear River and Atlantic Ocean and that it is necessary to look at removing this component of the dam in order to reestablish the natural hydrodynamic flow that occurred between the Cape Fear River and the Atlantic Ocean prior to the dam's construction. Based on the findings of the General Assembly, DEQ will take the following steps:

- (1) Notify the USACE of the State's intent to study the removal of the southern component of the dam.
- (2) Issue a Request for Information for a firm capable of conducting an analysis of the costs and benefits of removing the southern component of the dam. The analysis will incorporate all necessary State and federal permits and approvals needed to develop and implement a removal plan.
- (3) Request approval from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to adjust the boundary for the Zeke's Island Reserve. This adjustment involves moving the western boundary of Zeke's Island Reserve 200 feet seaward and removing the area that lies between the current and new boundary from the NCNERR. To compensate for loss of acreage from the boundary adjustment, the State proposes to add equivalent acreage to the northern boundary of Zeke's Island Reserve from adjacent acreage at Fort Fisher State Recreation Area.
- (4) If NOAA approves of the boundary adjustment, the Coastal Resources Commission will amend the Reserve Components Rule (15A NCAC 070 .0105) as further described in the Act.

DEQ will provide a report on its implementation of this section including a copy of the Request for Information and any responses received to the Environmental Review Commission and relevant General Assembly committees no later than April 1, 2016.

DEQ or any state agency cannot proceed with the removal of the dam until the Environmental Review Commission has reviewed the report and a bill providing authorization for the removal becomes law.

Study Further Efficiencies in Organization of Department of Natural and Cultural Resources and Department of Environmental Quality

The 2015 Appropriations Act also transferred many DEQ attractions, including the N.C. Aquariums, State Parks, and Zoo, to the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources (DNCR). The 2015 Appropriations Act calls for a study [14.31.(a-b)] by DNCR in consultation with DEQ and the Wildlife Resources Commission to look at moving additional agencies, divisions, and programs to DNCR for potential efficiency, cost savings, and alignment of core mission and values. These include:

- (1) Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership.
- (2) Coastal Reserve Program.
- (3) Office of Land and Water Stewardship.
- (4) All or a portion of the Office of Environmental Education and Public Affairs.
- (5) Division of Marine Fisheries.
- (6) Wildlife Resources Commission.

By April 1, 2016, DNCR will report the findings of this study to the Senate Appropriations Committee on Natural and Economic Resources, the chairs of the House Appropriations Committee on Agriculture and Natural and Economic Resources, and the Fiscal Research Division.

- *Budget*
 - The NCNERR received \$594,450 from NOAA for operation of the program during this fiscal year, up \$1,450 from last year.
 - The Division of Coastal Management's state appropriations were reduced by nearly \$100,000 this fiscal year as a result of the recurring 2% management flexibility reduction and its share of the \$1 million reduction for the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality required by the General Assembly in the 2015 Appropriations Act. As a result, the appropriations allocated for the Reserve program were reduced by approximately \$12,672.
- *NCNERR Management Plan Update*

Staff are continuing to write the full draft management plan update for the N.C. National Estuarine Research Reserve. This draft is informed by comments received by the local advisory committees on the strategic plan outline at the Spring committee meetings as well as comments from NOAA. The timeline for the management plan update process has been updated as a result of the writing taking longer than anticipated and receiving additional clarity on the reviews needed. Thus, input will be solicited on the full draft management plan from the LACs this winter. Staff will also be seeking input from the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality, N.C. Coastal Resources Commission, and NOAA as part of the process. A 30-day public comment

period and three public meetings will be held on the final draft management plan prior to the plan's final publication in 2016, as previously described.

- *LAC Community Member Appointments*

An additional extension request will be submitted to the Secretary of the Department of Environmental Quality to extend terms of Local Advisory Committee members serving in community member seats that expired in December 2014 through December 2016. The request for extension will ensure continuity throughout the NCNERR Management Plan update process. An application and appointment process will be undertaken during the fall of 2016.

Site Update/Old Business

- *General site conditions*

The spring and summer seasons passed with no particular unusual occurrences to note. Use patterns throughout spring, summer and into fall were typical. The barrier island sustained moderate erosion along the dune front and mild overwash, especially in the narrow southern reaches, as a result of the storm system, winds, rain, and waves associated with the hurricane Joaquin system which followed the higher than usual high tide associated with the September super moon. A significant amount of marine debris washed up in the wrack from these events; reserve staff will be working to encourage and support community cleanups to address this need.

- *Research program*

Research staff pulled half of the water quality sondes out of the water in preparation for the hurricane Joaquin storm system. No damage was done to the research infrastructure and data collection was back up and running at normal intervals and locations within days after the storm passed. The biomonitoring portion of the national system-wide monitoring program - emergent marsh monitoring was completed during peak biomass. This program collects demographic and biophysical parameters in the salt marsh each summer. The program is in its fifth year; data will be used to assess change over time and look for trends related to the marsh ecosystem. The research staff has been working with the new GIS staff person to begin to create a geodatabase of research projects.

- *July Fourth Operations*

The July Fourth gathering on the north end beach at Masonboro Island is being managed at what could be considered a "maintenance" level. The planning, execution, and conditions of the 2015 gathering were similar to the past few years. The Reserve coordinated with law enforcement agencies prior to and following the holiday, contracting with the New Hanover County Sheriff's Office for supplemental law enforcement services. Regardless of the day of the week, the Fourth continues to be the only day the critical level of activity is occurring; therefore, law enforcement activities were concentrated on this day. The crowd on the Fourth was estimated at 1000. Twenty-three officers were on the island during the Fourth, including an

EMT. A command center was set up at the USCG station on WB, as in previous years. The level of cooperation and coordination continues to improve overall efficiency and response effectiveness across the entire region (Mason's Inlet through Carolina Beach Inlet). Statistics for the day include: 64 medical assists, including 8 medical transports; 44 citations and 3 arrests, including 23 transports for citations. Masonboro.org continued to provide information and garbage collection throughout the day. Reserve staff continued to engage in public relations activities to encourage responsible visitor behavior, to install temporary signage prior to the gathering, and to survey the area following the gathering. The greatest concerns associated with the gathering continue to be the public safety hazard the situation represents and the impact to multiple agencies' resources associated with preparation and response.

- *Species of concern monitoring outcomes*

The MI sea turtle program completed patrols on fewer days this season than in previous recent years: three times per week May 15 – June 15, five times per week June 16 – July 31, and three times per week August 1 – 18. Some missed/wild nests occurred as a result. A total of 39 false crawls and 23 nests were located. One nest was predated by what appeared to be a red fox. Two nests were lost prior to excavation due to the storm (although they may have hatched prior to the storms). Complete details about the season will be available at the End of Season Report session on October 22 at 6pm in the Center for Marine Science (CMS) Auditorium.

The Terrapin Tally was conducted during four data collection periods on May 2 and 16. The total number of terrapins sighted was 75. This is the second year of this program, conducted in conjunction with the Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC). Reserve and WRC staff are looking at the 2014 data vs. the 2015 data to assess what conditions and tide cycles seem to provide the best opportunity to site turtles. We are also working to move to a downloadable phone application for this program. Nearly 100 community members participated.

Shorebird monitoring was completed on the island between April and August. A biological technician monitored 2-3 times per week. Thirty-four pairs of American oystercatchers (AMOY) were monitored. Fifty-two nests were located; 5 hatchlings fledged. Fecundity (the number of fledglings produced per pair) was 0.147 (compared to 0.152 in 2014 and 0.26 in 2013). Causes of nest failure included: unknown, predation, storm overwash, and disturbance. Additional predator removal work may be undertaken during the winter season with the objective of increasing fecundity. Additional details will be provided at the previously mentioned October 22 program.

- *Volunteer programs*

Community volunteers were associated with all of the species monitoring activities described above. Between March and September, volunteer effort included: 58 hours associated with bird nesting area postings; 172.25 hours associated with sea turtle monitoring by community volunteers; 475.5 hours associated with summer interns supporting sea turtle monitoring and other stewardship activities; and 516 hours associated with the terrapin tally.

- *Outreach and education activities*

Marie, the Southern Sites Education Specialist, began working half time in August and will continue through May. (Recall that this is a temporary position funded with carry-forward funds rather than a permanently funded position.) Spring and summer outreach (not including the Terrapin Tally) included a lecture series, the backyard naturalist program (conducted in partnership with the County Extension program), festivals, and a community paddling trip. Together these programs reached over 250 members of the general public. Much of the education focus during the summer and into fall has been focused on reworking the Island Explorers program, the elementary education program Masonboro.org created, in order to transition this program to a third party provider who will deliver the educational content. Marie worked closely with Masonboro.org and Carolina Ocean Studies, the chosen educational entity, to redevelop the curriculum to fit a different location at the south end of the island and to accommodate much larger groups of students. The fall trips began in September and continue through the month of October. Fifth grade classes from 6 New Hanover County schools are being served this session. Other education and outreach programs we have been able to maintain with the reduced educational capacity include a fall lecture series and social media. Two fall paddling trips were cancelled due to weather; the fall lecture series started October 8 with Blue Crab Basics. Animals of Barrier Islands will be offered on October 15, the End of Season Report will be offered on October 22, and the Incredible Oyster session, conducted in partnership with the research hatchery will be held on November 5. All sessions are held in the CMS auditorium at 6 pm.

New Business

- *Shellfish leases*

A new management concern at the Masonboro Island Reserve site is shellfish leases. Members may have seen recent media stories regarding shellfish leases at the site. The proposed locations of two leases are marked with PVC posts in the Big Bay area (directly across the Intracoastal Waterway from the Trails End boat ramp.) One shellfish lease has been approved by the Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), which is responsible for the shellfish lease program in N.C. Two more leases are under consideration in the same area. The lease that has been approved includes 2.3 acres of both water column and bottom lease. Conditions specific to its location within the Reserve boundary have been included in the lease agreement as agreed upon DMF, Reserve, and the applicant. The Reserve staff have been looking into this activity in the context of the entire Reserve program, including the multiple sites at which this activity could occur, the purpose of the Reserve sites, and the various uses at the sites. The Reserve staff have also been working with DMF to refine the list of conditions that may be appropriate for leases within the Reserve site boundaries. Reserve staff have been discussing ways to balance being supportive of this use with concerns about creating areas within the sites that are permanently or semi-permanently off limits to all other uses. Reserve staff are also considering how to manage the potential cumulative effect of multiple leases within one area, such as Big Bay. We are considering defining specific areas within reserve sites that would be considered open to this activity; this would allow areas of high recreational use, important research significance, or

areas used for other activities (education, commercial fishing) to be avoided. Members discussed this topic and made the following comments and recommendations: due to the large number of fishermen utilizing the wild oysters at this site, there may be user conflicts with this activity; a slow and cautious approach should be employed to allow time to understand any potential problems with this activity; the Reserve should retain the ability to ask that leases not be renewed if they become problematic; implementing conditions that protect Reserve resources and minimize conflict with other users will be important.

Roundtable Discussion

- Mr. Ahlum shared that the off-shore weather buoy closest to Masonboro is back on line.
- Mr. O’Keefe suggested that members consider participating in the County’s meeting regarding the new land use maps. The entire Masonboro Island Reserve area is in a “conservation” zoning. The County is holding a meeting on the 28th from 5-7:30 at the Government Center.
- Mr. Raney expressed concern about the loss of staff to support outreach and volunteer coordination. He suggested that LAC members may be able to help or that perhaps a volunteer could be recruited to coordinate volunteers.
- Ms. Williard expressed similar concerns and suggested that there may be a role that UNCW students could play to support these activities.
- Mr. Willard commented that because Wrightsville Beach is enforcing mooring ordinances more tightly, there may be more boats anchoring long-term in the Masonboro Channel area. He suggested that the Reserve may want to keep an eye on this situation.
- Mr. Romano expressed interest in staying informed about activities related to the terrapin tally due to concerns about possible restrictions on crabbing activities based on data related to terrapins.
- Sergeant Schmidlin offered Sheriff’s Office support related to derelict boats and mentioned an interest in being involved with outreach programs.
- Mr. Andrew announced that the Island Explorers trip on the following Friday would include a media contingent due to the presentation by Duke Power of funds to support the program. He also informed the group that volunteers were needed to support the remaining trips for the fall season.
- Mr. Wilgis announced that the collaborative stormwater project between the NC Coastal Federation, the NCNERR, the City of Wilmington, the Town of Wrightsville Beach, and UNCW has been completed. This project included stormwater management improvements and monitoring of effectiveness of these improvements. The monitoring data collected showed significant reductions in fecal coliforms. Mr. Wilgis also informed the group that the state’s oyster habitat advisory group, which he is a member of, would meet next in January and suggested that he could provide additional information on the groups’ activities to interested members.

Public Comments

- None

Action Items

- Reserve staff will provide the draft management plan to members during the winter. Members will have two weeks in which to comment.
- Reserve staff will contact members early in 2016 to schedule a spring meeting date and time.